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Prahla Chandra Brahmachari

Prahla Chandra Brahmachari was a renunciant devotee of the goddess Kali, who was subject to trance states and visions throughout his life. He spent his later years as a Kali priest in Ramnathpur, West Bengal, having large goddess worship celebrations which attracted thousands of visitors.

He was born into a poor Brahman family in Orissa, somewhere between 1900 and 1910 (the date is uncertain). He was one of five brothers, none of whom ever attended school. His father would spend time in meditation, and sing to Rama. The family lived on land which could grow rice only for four or five months during the year, and the rest of the year was a time of semi-starvation for the family. Occasionally his father might act as a priest, and receive a small amount of money. The children had rickets and malnutrition, subsisting during the lean months on one meal a day of bread made from grass roots.

One day, Prahla stole some green mangos from a neighbor's tree, and brought them to his mother as food for the family. When his father found out later, he was furious, and started hitting the child with an axe. Prahla ran away bleeding, covering the wounds with grass.

He ran off into the woods, and travelled at random until he passed out from

weakness. He awoke to see a *sannyasi* (monk) before him, smiling and compassionate. The *sannyasi* gave him some flat bread to eat, and touched his wounds with a log of wood. After that touch, the pain disappeared. Prahlad kept that log with him throughout his life. Then the *sannyasi* searched for a kind of leaf with a tough stem, and grabbed Prahlad's tongue and wrote lines on it with the leaf. He etched the lines so hard that Prahlad's tongue bled, and his "senses were lost," as Prahlad went into a state of trance.

He regained consciousness at sunrise, and the *sannyasi* was gone. He could only see the remnants of a ritual fire (*dhuni*) and some coins. He considered his survival of his father's beating to be a new chance at life. He rode the train in rags to Howrah station, and lived in Calcutta on the banks of the Ganges for several years, sleeping on burlap sacks. He survived in a variety of ways, first by begging, and then by acting as a wandering Kali priest with a picture of the goddess hung around his neck. He would visit shopkeepers and bless them with the goddess' image, and they would give him a few pennies.

Sometimes he would work as a servant, a dishwasher, or a sweeper, ignoring the caste of the people for whom he worked. He was unhappy at these jobs, but at night he received instructions on yoga in his dreams from the goddess Kali.

During the day, he would contemplate these dreams and fall into trance states. This made him a poor worker, and he was often condemned by his employers. However, he did save some money, and decided to visit his parents after a gap of several years. His youngest brother had died, and his father took the money to renovate the family worship room. He continued to have visits from the goddess in his dreams, and she gave him instructions in meditation and hatha yoga. She told him to leave the household again, and he did so.

He returned to Calcutta, and first took a job as a servant, and then as a wandering priest. The goddess continued her yogic dream instructions, and he perfected his yoga postures, staying in one position for the whole night. Accompanying these practices were states of bliss. He had kept the *sannyasi*'s log of wood, and the goddess told him in a dream command to chew it. He would scrape off small pieces of the log to chew, and he would start having visions. He could hear verses from the sacred books of India, and see pages written in gold letters. When a person stood before him, Prahlad could "read his heart," and know the person's innermost secrets. He gained an ability to tell the future, and took up a new career as an astrologer. While people had

looked down upon him previously for being ignorant, now they would call him anxiously to tell their futures, and his predictions were generally accurate.

He continued his nightly yogic exercises, seeing himself as a tool in the goddess' hands. He continued chewing splinters from the log, and he lost track of time, with "tidal waves" of Sanskrit coming out of his mouth without forethought, in the form of hymns from the Hindu holy books (Vedas and Puranas). He would see visions of light before him, and lose track of his surroundings.

At the age of twenty-four years he attended a funeral ceremony (*shraddha*) in Hooghly district, where his abilities to predict the future made him a valued guest. His hosts insisted that he continue his visit. He did a large number of predictions, and many people with diseases and legal problems came to speak with him. He underwent mood swings and would often enter into depressions, but he felt that he was following Kali's will. He acted briefly as priest in a small Kali temple nearby, but upset the villagers there by offering the goddess cooked food. They came en masse to threaten his host, and Prahlad was forced out of the house in which he was staying.

He wandered out and eventually sat beneath a large tamarind tree, in an open space with bushes and thorns. The goddess came to him in a vision, and told him that he should not spend his life with householders, but should create his own space. She said that he would have the barren land on which he sat. The next day, the owner of that land gave him permission to build a small ashram there, and he determined to settle there in Ramnathpur. He spent the next four years in meditation, often at a nearby burning ground. He found it frightening, but went there because it was the Mother's command.

When he had extra money, he mailed it to his parents, and they sent back a demand: Prahlad must marry. His father had chosen a girl, and told his son to marry her. Prahlad returned to Orissa to argue with them, but they were unwilling to listen to him. He went into a single yogic position (*asana*) and trance state for four days and nights, and returned to normal consciousness with indifference towards his potential bride and his family. He explained again his unwillingness to marry, and his view of all women as only embodiments of the Divine Mother. He then left the house silently, and disappeared off into the woods. He took a formal vow of renunciation, and put on the clothes of a sannyasi.

He returned to Ramnathpur, and again started doing yogic practice at night. During the day, he would do ritual worship for the villagers and foretell the future. Every new moon, he worshiped the goddess at the burning ground. On one new moon in February, the villagers insisted upon following Prahlad to witness his ritual offering to Ratanty Kali. About fifteen people came, bearing lights and long sticks (*lathis*). Prahlad took a sharp knife and cut his arm, to offer his blood at the Mother's feet. The wind whistled, and a storm came up, blowing out the lights and frightening the villagers so that they ran away. Outside the burning ghat the weather was quiet, and the villagers then returned. They found the altar blown over, and Prahlad unconscious and lying in a pit. They sprinkled his face with Ganges water to awaken him. During the storm he had had a vision of the goddess as infinite light, and he had been absorbed into the Mother's spirit.

About three years after his sudden exit from the wedding, another message came from his parents: Prahlad must return, because his father was dying. He went to his parent's house, and fulfilled his father's last wishes, and he gained his father's blessings. Among other requests, his father told him that he must not neglect the worship of the family deity Rama, even if Kali was his special goddess. After his father's death, Prahlad was grief-stricken, and roamed through South India as a beggar for a month. He then returned to Ramnathpur.

When he came back to the village, two men asked for initiation from him as their guru. He also became the guru for their families. He then initiated many other people. When he entered a house, the villagers would offer him fruits and sweets, and wash his feet. However, the villagers would go through periods of doubt, and once they condemned Prahlad as a false monk, saying that they would only believe him if he could stay in his room without food or water for seven days. He went into the dark room, and knelt down before the statue of Kali, who filled the room with light. She came in visionary form and took Prahlad onto her lap, and he felt that their souls merged for seven days. He did not eat, drink, or leave the room during that week, until the trance ended at the appropriate time. It was his last trial by the villagers at Ramnathpur.

He had a variety of places where he would meditate. Often he would spend time in contemplation within a hollowed-out tree. He also had a meditation hut on a raised area between some rice and pan fields. Buried under the floor of this hut were five skulls, and he would sit over these skulls. The room also had a trident and an *omkar* (Sanskrit letter OM) painted on the wall. Later

there were pictures of deities, and stick figures on the wall, and a large altar with a picture of a blue Kali. He warned others that this room had great power, and that it would be dangerous for others to live there. Apparently one person stayed in this hut while Prahlad was on a pilgrimage, and this visitor died after a few days there of snakebite. It is still said that the goddess Kali speaks to people who enter the hut.

Prahlad called himself a kite in the hands of Kali, which she keeps whirling. She is infinite light, showing herself as a candle, or as the soothing morning sun, or the violent and scorching sun at noon. He followed her will in practicing yoga and meditation at Ramnathpur ashram for over fifty years. He would offer Kali blood on new-moon night, when he would slit his wrists, and his disciples would hear him moan and gasp. He was often asked for boons by his disciples, especially for healing and for children, and for predicting the future. He had a coconut marked with red sindur powder and a long tongue, which he called Old Mother or Ancestress (*Budi Ma*). He performed rituals to Old Mother each day, when he chanted mantras and did his ritual fire sacrifice. When visitors would ask him to do things for them, he would ask Old Mother's opinion. He would put a flower on top of the coconut, and if it remained there, he would agree to the request. If it fell, he would not accede to the request.

Prahlad gained disciples outside of West Bengal in his later life, including ones from the USA. In India he had a core group of about forty disciples, though he initiated large numbers of people (he looked for various physical signs, such as a sharply pointed tongue, which was the sign of a Kali devotee). Some Western disciples came to India and brought him to Brooklyn on several occasions. He would fall into trance states frequently there, becoming the child Krishna, the goddess, and the warrior Arjuna (among other roles), and he would perform fire sacrifices (*homa* fires) and pujas (ritual worship). He knew no English, and refused to touch money, living the life of a renunciant Kali priest as well as he could in a New York brownstone building.

He spoke to his Bengali devotees about prayer to the Mother:

You must always pray to the Mother. It is Mother who takes you on her lap. She is my god, Mahamaya, the great Kundalini Shakti. You have to wake Her first, and pray to Her first. That is why our worship of the Mother must come first. Because who is he who is my Father? Only the Mother knows. She will take me to him in her arms. If you can wake up Mahamaya, that great power

in the sushumna, in the thousand petalled lotus, then you will drink nectar.. this is why I perform the Homa fire before her... Mother is the provider; without the mother, there is no father. When the Mother takes me in her lap, she will merge me with Brahman. Mother knows my father's name, and my caste, and she knows the path to infinity. Without Mother, one cannot find that impossible path.

The goddess is reflected in human women, and also in statues: You must first pray to the outer mother, only then can you gain the Mother within. It is like seeing your face in mirror. You must see the outer image, so that you can know what you look like... Ma is in many places. Once when I was defecating, I was digging with a stick, and a small statue appeared. The goddess within it spoke to me, and she said, "I am Anandamayi." I took it back and cleaned it very well, and it shone like gold. Some robbers saw it and thought it was real gold, and they took it away. I began to cry, and the Mother came and said to me, "Let the statue go. Have no fear. They have only taken my outer form. The statue which is established inside you is still there, the robbers have not been able to take it."

According to his disciples and to people who knew him, he had a variety of psychic powers, especially the abilities to induce visions and to communicate at a distance. As one informant stated:

When Baba (Prahlad) was doing his *homa fire*, I saw a vision of the goddess, Ma Kali. She was dancing in a river of blood, like a waterfall, but she was beautiful and laughing. She had blue skin and six arms, with weapons and other things in her hands. She laughed with bliss.

His devotees spoke of his having a "cosmic telephone." He would put his finger on the ground, as if pressing a button, and say that he was in touch with someone at a distance. He was said to be particularly adept at entering the dreams of his devotees. As an American informant stated, I once had a dream of Baba before I met him, in which I was playing a guitar and singing spiritual songs. He appeared in a loincloth, dancing with one arm up in the air, his legs moving rapidly, stomping to the rhythm of the song. Suddenly, the scene changed, and he was staring at me, six inches from my face, his eyes focused intently on me. A strange power radiated from his eyes. I felt myself expand inwardly, and my heart was full of a bliss that spread through my body. Later I learned that one of his devotees had given him a picture of me. When I met him months later, as soon as I walked into the room his translator told me that Baba wanted to know if I remembered him, that he had visited me. He did not say this to any of the other thirty people in the room. I think he had used the picture as a means of contacting

me.

I saw that same look when he gave one of his visitors in New York City darshan. He sat the person down and stared intensely at her for a period of minutes. She later said she had a profound spiritual experience during this period.

His American devotees were worried about his active practices:

Once during kirtan of the Hare Krishna mantra, I remember that Baba became more and more agitated. During the chanting, he suddenly jumped to his feet and started dancing faster and faster, jumping and shouting. He looked as if he were losing control of his body. His oldest devotee became worried that he would have a heart attack (he was in his seventies), that his health would not sustain such activity. She jumped up and tried to quiet him, putting her arms around him and lowering him to a sitting position. She asked people not to encourage such kirtan. It seemed that he had done such active kirtan often, in his younger days, and used it as a means of entering an altered state.

One disciple, who said that she had seen Baba in a dream over a year before she met him, spoke of her love and dedication to her guru. She said that he knew things about her at a distance; he had warned her not to cover her altar at home with a cloth (she had done so before going to see him, but had not told him about it), and not to perform the homa fire outside the ashram (which she had done). She said that when she felt his spiritual presence, it energized her body, and made her feel "out of this world," seeing a deep purple-blue light and feeling love for all living things. This occurred when he would go into a special state of blessing, with one hand on her head, and one hand in the air, reaching towards the Mother.

Prahlad Chandra Brahmachari visited the West several times, gained small groups of disciples, and died in 1982.

Source of the above information:

*Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls:
Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal*
J. McDaniel, (Oxford University Press, 2004)

A Disciple's Spiritual Dream of Prahlad Long After His Death

For more information on Prahlad Chandra, visit:

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